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Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to overhaul education is right approach

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Article Text:

The future of California is here. Our state -- with its great cultural and economic diversity -- is at an important point in its history.

Our economy is adapting to the dynamic global marketplace. But, due to many factors, including the Great Recession, many of our state's young people are not prepared for this change.

The number of California children living in poverty has more than doubled from 1980 to 2011. Many of these children are English learners -- in 2011, 70 percent of children living in poverty were Latino. Until now, we have tackled these changing conditions on a piecemeal basis, adding numerous programs and measurements without changing the big picture of how we invest our educational resources.

Gov. Jerry Brown has put before the Legislature a plan to restructure the school financing system to give greater decision-making authority to local schools and to direct more money to children who need the most academic help.

The governor's proposal is based on two ideas. First, local communities and teachers know better than the state about what works in local classrooms. Second, it does cost more money to teach some children -- such as English learners, students in poverty, and foster youth -- than others. This is a common-sense proposal that recognizes the truths that are obvious to any parent, teacher, principal or administrator.

The current education financing system is far too complicated. It has rules and mandates sent down from Sacramento in the form of "categorical bureaucracy" -- state programs with money that can be spent only for state-defined purposes.

The governor's plan takes dozens of categorical programs and collapses them into a flexible funding stream that local communities can use as they wish, based on local needs. The proposed plan also holds local communities accountable for spending the money effectively for the benefit of our children. Local leaders will be required to define their education plans, with input from parents, teachers and their community.

The governor's plan also strategically targets additional money above base funding to children with the greatest need -- non-English speakers, children in poverty and foster youth. This is very important. Research shows that these children are more likely to fall out of the system than others. In new state data, English learners and African-American and Latino students dropped out of high school at a far higher rate than white students.

While no education-funding plan can cure systemic poverty, it can address the stark reality of educating children in California today.

The governor's proposal recognizes this reality while also maintaining a steady growth in funding for all school districts, even wealthy ones. Under the proposal, per-student spending on a statewide basis is projected to increase by more than \$2,700.

Still, critics of the plan point to years of devastating cuts as a reason to simply fund the status quo. The problem is that the status quo allocates scarce resources indiscriminately and ignores the higher cost to teach some children than others. We all want more money for every child's education. They deserve it.

Every child in school today also needs to live in a California with an educated workforce and electorate. And every child deserves a chance to participate fully in that future society.

The governor's plan calls on all Californians to recognize our shared interests and put aside our parochial notions. A society that values and promotes equality is a stronger society. This is why we support the governor's thoughtful plan to restructure education financing.

Raquel F. Donoso is chief executive of the Latino Community Foundation; Madeline Kronenberg is president of the West Contra Costa Unified School District and John M. Gioia is a Contra Costa County supervisor and first vice president of the California State Association of Counties.

Caption:

Photo:

Gov. Jerry Brown speaks during his appearance at the California State Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Sacramento, Calif., Wednesday, May 29, 2013. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

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